Mechanical Failures

Ken Raines

The old man shimminates and coughs along the shoulder of the road and veers like the wobble in the wheel that brought his Airstream to a stop.

He limped it in to Morgan’s shop, and Morgan said he’d see what he could do. “Just pull around in back, there, Stranger. This may take a while.”

Three decades on, and still he’s parked out back, where every break of day he lights the propane stove and listens to the hiss beneath his frying eggs.

He starts a bottle of Jim Beam for lunch and waits, perhaps, for parts, thinking of the years since he first noticed the air was gone from all the tires.

Sometimes he wakes in the afternoon when radials crackle on gravel and glass as the wrecker drags another husk or burned-out shell around in back.

If Morgan is driving, as he passes, he honks and points at the wreckage and cackles, “Sooner or later . . . sooner or later . . . There, Stranger, it’s gonna catch us all.”
The old man fumes, and profanity gathers in the back of his throat. But before it can rise, he forgets what he meant to say, at least until he sees Morgan again.

And every day the old man totters along, weaving among the hoods and the domes and the naked transmissions and rims that have come to hem him in.

But when he turns for home, he sees the gleam of sunset on his Airstream, that stainless, fat torpedo sleeking through the pitted chrome and twisted steel.

And though his sense of direction has come unmoored, he glides by engine blocks and jumbled obstacles worn smooth in the slow currents of long habit.